

JIM BARBER'S SPITE FENCE
By
LILLIAN BEYNON THOMAS



SAMUEL FRENCH (CANADA)

480 University Ave, TORONTO

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JIM BARBER'S SPITE FENCE

A COMEDY IN ONE ACT

BY
LILLIAN BEYNON THOMAS

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Ground Plans of Set for Jim Barber's Spite Fence

JIM BARBER's back yard. To the right of stage is the back door of JIM BARBER's house which is not seen. From the pole on which there is a bird house is a clothesline, that is supposed to be fastened to the unseen back of the house. The entrance is from the back door of JIM BARBER's house. The only other entrance is through the fence when two boards, beside the painted sunflower are removed. The wall of JANE HATHAWAY's house can be seen through the opening. To the left of the stage the front half of two hencoops, with water pans in front of them can be seen by the audience.

A small table stands out from the fence near the foot of the pole with the bird house. On it there is a pan of clothes, already washed, that ELIZABETH is hanging on the line. She has a bag of clothespins and a cloth with which she wipes the table when she gets the clothes out. The clothes are a man's nightgown, socks, old shirt, some towels and red handkerchiefs. One old chair stands near the fence.

An old workbench stands right centre, on an angle slightly toward audience. At one end is a pail with water and a long-handled dipper. Under the bench is a bag with some chicken feed and a small pan to carry it in.

ELIZABETH brings out a dust mop to shake down near the coops. JANE brings in a small table cloth, four knives and forks and a couple of spoons, to set the table. JIM brings in two chairs. Later JIM carries in a dish for JANE, while she brings in some cups and saucers.

Lighting: As nearly like sunlight as possible.

Description of Characters in Jim Barber's Spite Fence

JIM BARBER is about sixty-five years of age. May be a little older. In this play he is an Irishman, but the part has been played without any accent equally successfully. He is very carelessly dressed, as he is working around his backyard. Overalls, worn boots, a grey shirt, open at the neck, and a battered old hat. Bark is worse than his bite.

JANE HATHAWAY. Scotch in the play but has been played successfully without any accent. About sixty years of age, dressed in a modern house dress. Capable and quite able to get her own way.

HENRY HATHAWAY and ELIZABETH NEVINS are modern young farm people neatly and well dressed. About thirty years of age. Much concerned about what people think.

Descriptive Story of Jim Barber's Spite Fence

Jim Barber and Jane Hathaway raised families on farms in the same neighbourhood. They respected each other but never agreed. Later, Jim Barber, a widower, left his daughter Elizabeth and her husband Angus Nevins to run the farm, while he moved into the village to carry out his life-long dream of raising prize chickens.

Jane Hathaway, a widow, left her son Henry and his wife to manage her farm and moved into the village to carry out her dream of raising the most beautiful rose. They happened to settle on adjoining lots, and when Jane killed one of Jim's chickens because it scratched up her rosebush, Jim built a spite fence between their yards.

This made Jim's yard too hot for his chickens and kept the sun from Jane's roses, so that neither would get prizes at the fairs. Also it made so much talk, that Elizabeth determined to make her father give up his home and go back and live with her on the farm. Henry Hathaway also determined to make his mother go and live with him. Age and youth in their eternal struggle to understand each other is the theme, in a very humorous situation, that terminates happily for all.

JIM BARBER'S SPITE FENCE

The setting is JIM BARBER's backyard, where he is trying to raise the best hen in the world. He has been so worried by his next-door neighbour, JANE HATHAWAY, a widow, who is trying to raise prize roses, that he has built a spite fence between her yard and his. This fence is proving detrimental to both the flowers and the chickens as well as causing much gossip in the village.

TIME: *The present.*

When the play opens, ELIZABETH, JIM BARBER's married daughter, who lives on a farm and is very anxious to have her father go out and live with her and her husband, is hanging out a washing she has just finished for her father. She still has to clean up the house but she is so worried about her father living alone and causing so much gossip, she is determined to force the issue and persuade him to go and live with her and ANGUS.

JIM is sitting on an old bench back of his house, changing his shoes and glancing occasionally at his chicken coops at the foot of the yard. They discuss JANE HATHAWAY and her son HENRY, who lives on a farm and is anxious to have his mother go out and live with him and his wife. When ELIZABETH goes into the house JANE HATHAWAY climbs up a ladder on her side of the spite fence and her conversation with JIM takes place from the top of the fence where she is finally joined by her son.

JIM BARBER. You don't think I care what they say?

ELIZABETH. But father, everybody in Valley-

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field is talking about you and Jane Hathaway quarrelling and that spite fence defacing the landscape.

JIM BARBER. Landscape! Do you call that a landscape? And if it is, I guess I've as much right to deface it as anybody else. I pay taxes, don't I?

ELIZABETH. Of course you have the right, but it's making you and Jane Hathaway the laughing stock of the town and it isn't fair to us.

JIM BARBER. Let them laugh. Laugh till they split their sides if it does them any good, for all I care.

ELIZABETH. (*Looking at holes in his stocking*) Oh, father, I wish you'd come out to the farm and live with Angus and me. You'd have a good home and all the land you need to raise your chickens.

JIM BARBER. (*Jumps up*) Now Lizzie, we're not going to have all that over again. When you married Angus he didn't expect to have me foisted on him. Besides I'm doing what I want. I'm raising the finest hens and—

ELIZABETH. (*Interrupts*) Yes, and your chickens are dying because that spite fence is making the yard too hot; and Mrs. Hathaway's flowers are dying for the sun and—

JIM BARBER. Well, they're my chickens. I guess they can die if they want.

ELIZABETH. But father, ever since Mrs. Hathaway's sickness people are blaming you. They say it isn't human not to forget your quarrels when she's been so near death.

JIM BARBER. Yes, but do you know what she done?

ELIZABETH. Killed a chicken or something. But that isn't the question.

JIM BARBER. Isn't it the question? I guess if it was your chicken it'd be the question. Killed my chicken and me lookin' at her and shoutin' and tellin' her it was a pure bred leghorn and no good

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for eatin'. And what did she do? Listen to me? She did not. She snips the head off, throws the feathers into my yard and leaves her kitchen door open so I could smell it cookin'.

ELIZABETH. Yes, but she said it was in her yard scratching up the flowers she is raising to show at the fair.

JIM BARBER. That's a lie. It never scratched up nothin'—of any account, anyhow.

ELIZABETH. But father, she's been sick, almost dead. Everyone feels sorry for her. She might have died that day alone if Henry hadn't happened along. That's what I want to talk to you about. Angus and I don't like to have you living here alone. Neighbours are talking, saying we're neglecting you. You might get sick.

JIM BARBER. No fear of that. Never had a day's sickness in forty years. Not goin' to git delicate now.

ELIZABETH. That's what Jane Hathaway said when Henry wanted her to live with him and Mary. She wouldn't go. Now people are blaming him, saying he neglected her.

JIM BARBER. Well, I don't see Jane Hathaway goin' to live with nobody.

ELIZABETH. Henry came in this morning. He's going to take her back to the farm as soon as she's able to go.

JIM BARBER. I'll believe it when I see it. Now you run along, Lizzie, and don't be listenin' to gossip. I'm doin' what I always wanted. Raisin' the best hens in this part, takin' all the prizes and—

ELIZABETH. But if you took sick and died alone?

JIM BARBER. Not a chance. I never et better in my life.

ELIZABETH. But you should think about us, father.

JIM BARBER. Seems like you young folks set a

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lot a store by bein' on hand when a feller is havin' his last tussel. I don't want you should all be standin' around gapin' at me when I'm kickin' out. If I want to die alone I'm goin' to die alone.

ELIZABETH. But father, people are saying terrible things about Henry and his wife for letting his mother live alone. Don't you see they'd say the same about us?

JIM BARBER. You're thinkin' a lot more about what folks would say than about what I'm feelin'. There's just one thing me and Jane Hathaway has in common. We both raised families. We both worked hard lookin' forward to the time we could do what we wanted, and now—

ELIZABETH. Yes, and now you're spoiling her garden and your chickens are dying and people are—

JIM BARBER. Doggone it, Lizzie, I'm not goin' to be bossed by you. I done what your mother wanted for forty years. Now she's gone I'm goin' to live how I like.

ELIZABETH. Well, I'm going to clean up the house for you. It's a sight. But when I've finished we'll have another talk. I want you to consider our side. It isn't fair to Angus and me for you to think only of yourself. (*Exit*.)

— JIM BARBER. (*Feeds the chickens and talks jerkily to himself*) Why can't they let us be? I'm living the way I always wanted. Not carin' whether my boots was clean. Eatin' when I feel like it and not when the clock says it's time. Why can't they let us alone? We give the best years of our lives to bringin' them up, givin' them our time and our sweat and our brains; doin' the best we can for them. Then we got to live like they say. Do what they think. I ain't goin' to do it. Lizzie had better be careful. She'll be gettin' me riled and no tellin' what I'll do. (*Sound of paper rustling on other side of spite fence causes JIM*

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BARBER to look and wait until JANE HATHAWAY appears above the fence.)

JANE HARHAWAY. (*Stands teetering uncertainly on ladder as she glances around the yard*) Whatever did you move your coops for, Jim?

JIM BARBER. Just to suit myself. What were you chasin' down the yard just now?

JANE HATHAWAY. (*Teetering uncertainly*) A wee magazine.

JIM BARBER. You'd best hang on there. If you're goin' to fall and break your neck I don't want you should do it on this side of the fence.

JANE HATHAWAY. I'm no counting on falling.

JIM BARBER. You've been doin' some things you wasn't countin' on. But for why was you chasin' a magazine? Couldn't you get nothin' else to fight with. You sounded as if you were tearin' it to bits.

JANE HATHAWAY. Aye, I was. It's all lies they're printing now-a-days. All lies. My family's caring for me so well all I have to do is improve my mind.

JIM BARBER. It could stand improvin' unless your sickness has changed you. All of which I'm doubtin'.

JANE HATHAWAY. Aye! It's changed me all right. You can't go down to the border and no be changed.

JIM BARBER. I'll believe that when I have the evidence. I've never knowed you to change without a purpose behind it, Jane Hathaway, never, and I've knowed you for forty long years.

JANE HATHAWAY. I see your chickens are not doing very well, Jim.

JIM BARBER. Is it because the odd one kicks out?

JANE HATHAWAY. It doesn't look like you'd be getting many prizes this Fall.

JIM BARBER. Don't you be frettin' about my

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prizes. I hear your garden isn't doin' any too well?

JANE HATHAWAY. Don't worry yourself. My mind's rising above worldly things. I greatly doubt if there'll be any prizes in heaven.

JIM BARBER. The prize will be if you get there.

JANE HATHAWAY. As I was saying, I haven't had anything to do but read since I took sick, and it's all lies they're printing, all lies. Everything comes out happy in the finish like we was all saints instead a folks.

JIM BARBER. Well, I'd say that was lies all right.

JANE HATHAWAY. Aye! If they was writing about you and me and this spite fence, Jim, they'd have us tearing it down at the end and falling on each other's necks.

JIM BARBER. God forbid!

JANE HATHAWAY. Amen to that! I hear Angus and Elizabeth are sorely worried about you living here alone and would like you to bide with them on the farm.

JIM BARBER. They haven't got me yet.

JANE HATHAWAY. Aye! But they will. They'll get you yet. You were always too soft with your family, Jim. Too easy going.

JIM BARBER. Get down off that fence. It gives me the jiggs to see you teetering up there.

JANE HATHAWAY. Then you don't need to be looking at me.

JIM BARBER. I'm not goin' to look at you. If you don't get down I'll make you.

JANE HATHAWAY. If you do I'll put the law again' you, and you'll be a sorry man you ever built this fence.

JIM BARBER. You think bein' sick you got the sympathy a folks but you can't go too far, you can't. And I'm not sure you were sick, anyhow. Pretendin' mebbe. Be like you.

JANE HATHAWAY. What? Me pretendin'. And

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me at death's door. It's enough to bring a judgment down on you. And more, nor that the law will no let you hurt folks' feelings.

JIM BARBER. Feelings! It's little a them you got.

JANE HATHAWAY. Have I no. Well, you'll mebbe be having a few when you get out choring for Angus.

JIM BARBER. And mebbe you'll be learnin' a few things when you go to live with Henry and Mary.

JANE HATHAWAY. No! No! I'm no going to live with Henry and Mary.

JIM BARBER. You'll see. They'll keep on at you and on at you.

JANE HATHAWAY. I ken fine what they're aiming at, Jim. You and me is going to be cast aside like old boots past walking in. They're thinking our day's done.

JIM BARBER. My day isn't done. I'm raisin' the best poultry was ever raised in these parts and I'm goin' to breed a hen that'll—

JANE HATHAWAY. Well, it'll no be with this fence here.

JIM BARBER. Won't spoil my chances at the fair worse nor yours.

JANE HATHAWAY. Aye! That's right. It's spoilin' my chances.

JIM BARBER. Serves you right. Killin' my chicken. A pure bred leghorn.

JANE HATHAWAY. Well, I'll admit it didna taste as good as I was expecting.

JIM BARBER. You dare to sit there and tell me the like a that? What is it you're wantin'? I don't want the neighbours to see you sittin' up there like we were friends.

JANE HATHAWAY. I'll sit on this fence as long as I like, Jim Barber, and you'll no be the one to stop me.

JIM BARBER. There comes Lizzie. She's been

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tidyin' up fer me. She'll make you get down.

JANE HATHAWAY. Your Lizzie put me down off this fence? Well, she'll have more backbone than her father ever had if she does.

ELIZABETH. (*Comes from house shaking dust mop*) How do you do, Mrs. Hathaway. Are you feeling better?

JANE HATHAWAY. Aye! Thank you for asking. I'm as well as ever I was.

JIM BARBER. You couldn't kill a tough old bird like her.

ELIZABETH. You've had a serious illness, Mrs. Hathaway. People as old as you and father shouldn't live alone.

JANE HATHAWAY. Deed I'm feeling as young as ever I did. Of course, your father's getting on.

JIM BARBER. I'm a year younger nor you, Jane Hathaway.

JANE HATHAWAY. Indeed you're nothing of the kind, Jim Barber.

JIM BARBER. It's a stranger to the truth you are, Jane Hathaway. I'm two years younger all but—

HENRY HATHAWAY. (*Appears above the fence beside his mother*) What's all this, Jim Barber? Are you calling my mother a liar?

JIM BARBER. I'm telling her the truth but she won't listen.

HENRY HATHAWAY. I won't have you insulting her.

ELIZABETH. Henry Hathaway, you keep out of this. Your mother called my father—

JANE HATHAWAY. I didn't call him anything. I just said he was getting on in years.

JIM BARBER. You get down off that fence, the two of you, and leave me alone. I won't have you—

HENRY HATHAWAY. I'll get down off this fence when I'm good and ready.

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ELIZABETH. That's my father's fence. You get down.

HENRY HATHAWAY. Yes it is, and a disgrace to him at that.

ELIZABETH. And why did he put it up? Answer me that.

HENRY HATHAWAY. Because he's a cantankerous old man, always fighting.

ELIZABETH. And what about your mother, isn't she always quarrelling?

JANE HATHAWAY. Wheest! Wheest! Gang on into the house, Henry. Lizzie, you mind your own business. This is your pa's fight and mine. 'Tain't the first we've had in the past forty years and it won't be the last. But we're not needing anybody to fight our battles. Come along, Henry. I'm going down to the store with Mary. (*Exit.*)

ELIZABETH. It's terrible, all this quarrelling. (*Pause*) But I haven't finished the house yet. It's a sight. Really, father, you shouldn't live like this.

JIM BARBER. Now, Lizzie, don't you be gettin' queer notions into your head. I'm happy. I'm doin' what I've always wanted. I'm takin' prizes at the fairs for the best hens and I'm going to raise the best hen in the world. I'll call it the Barber hen. You'll be proud of your old Dad then; everybody payin' big money for a settin' of Barber eggs.

ELIZABETH. I'm not keen to have a hen named after me, but if you do I hope it's better looking than those.

JIM BARBER. (*Anxiously*) What's the matter with them? (*He looks anxiously towards the coops.*)

ELIZABETH. Oh, I guess they're all right. (*Sees she has hurt him*) Of course they're all right, father. Well, Angus will be waiting for me. I must get my hat. (*Goes into house.*)

JIM BARBER. (*Goes to coops and looks anxiously at hens. Then turns back towards the house*

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and sighs as he sits down on the bench and waits for ELIZABETH.)

ELIZABETH. I must go now, father, but I'll be back. I want you to think about what I said this morning. We're worrying about you living alone.

JIM BARBER. Sit down, Lizzie. I want to talk to you.

ELIZABETH. I can't wait. Angus will be along in a minute. What is it?

JIM BARBER. I'm not going out to live with you and Angus on the farm.

ELIZABETH. Why?

JIM BARBER. It wouldn't be fair to Angus.

ELIZABETH. You are wrong there. Angus wants you.

JIM BARBER. You know a man's home is his castle, Lizzie. He should be master there and I'm terribly bossy. Your mother always said that.

ELIZABETH. But you'll be reasonable, Dad.

JIM BARBER. Indeed, I won't. Your mother always said I was most unreasonable.

ELIZABETH. Well, we'll have to do our best. We can't have people talking, saying we're neglecting you.

JIM BARBER. Besides, Angus hasn't much use for hens. He doesn't like them around. He'd be shoving them off into some hole or corner.

ELIZABETH. I know he would, but you can look after them, Dad.

JIM BARBER. But you see, Lizzie, them hens I got now have breeding. They got blue blood, as you might say. They're the kings and queens of poultry. They got to have attention, kinda be the center a things to make them thrive. They've got class, I tell you, and I'm going to breed a hen that'll be the most beautiful, and the best layer, and—

ELIZABETH. You're just making excuses, father.

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A man your age shouldn't try to start something new. You should take things easy.

JIM BARBER. I'm making excuses, am I? Well, maybe I am. But I have more than an excuse. I have a reason and I'm going to tell you.

ELIZABETH. All right, but hurry. Angus is coming.

JIM BARBER. All right, let him come. I'm not going to hurry.

ELIZABETH. Well, well, father, I guess he can wait. What is it?

JIM BARBER. No, you wouldn't understand.

ELIZABETH. I'll try father. Do go on.

JIM BARBER. (*Looks doubtfully at her*) I don't know rightly how to say it. Maybe it'll sound kinda silly to you, but I'm thinkin' men are born with dreams of what they're able to do. Some of them do it right off when they're young. Do somethin' big. Somethin' they're proud of. And when they retire they can think back on it and be happy and brag about it.

ELIZABETH. Not many men do anything to brag about.

JIM BARBER. You're wrong there. Most men have something to brag about. Mebbe it isn't much, like Aaron Smith, that took the prize for ploughing the straightest furrow and bragged about it for forty years; and Jim Breaky, that can throw horseshoes further than anybody in these parts and tells everybody; and Bob Southern, who has the loudest whistle and deafens everybody.

ELIZABETH. Well?

JIM BARBER. I haven't done anything to look back on and be proud of.

ELIZABETH. Oh, father, how can you say such a thing. You were as good a farmer as any in these parts.

JIM BARBER. Fair to middlin'. Just fair to mid-dlin'. Nothin' more.

ELIZABETH. You were a good husband.

JIM BARBER. Fair to middlin'. Just fair to middlin'. Your mother said that.

ELIZABETH. You are a good father, if you weren't so stubborn.

JIM BARBER. Fair to middlin', Lizzie, but I haven't done what's in me to do; what I've dreamed of doing. I've got the power in me. Look at that hand. (*Holds out hand*) Steady as a rock. I haven't been sick a day in forty years. (*Throws back shoulders*) I've always wanted to raise the best hen and I'm going to. (*Sound of auto horn.*)

— ELIZABETH. There's Angus now. I must go. But father, you should think how we feel, people all talking. You have only a few years at best.

JIM BARBER. You're danged generous with my years. Mebbe I have only a few and then mebbe I'll fool you.

ELIZABETH. Oh, well, if that's all you care.

JIM BARBER. You and Angus don't look weak from worryin' about me. And besides, if a man only has a few years he should use them how he likes. Besides, I'd only make a lot of extra work for you.

— ELIZABETH. That's all right. I'll get a maid. I've heard of a good one if I speak for her right away.

(*Horn*) I must go, father, but think how we feel. (*Exit.*)

JIM BARBER. (*To himself*) Might as well talk Chinese. She doesn't understand. She doesn't understand. (*He putters around the yard muttering to himself*) Thinks I want to rest. Take it easy. Soon enough, maybe, I'll be taking it easy. I've only a few years at best, have I? Well, begorra, I'm not goin' to say die before I'm dead. (*Straightens up, begins to hum a popular air and saunters jauntily down the yard.*)

JANE HATHAWAY. (*Appears above the fence*) Elizabeth's all set on getting you out to the farm,

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Jim. She's spoke for Betsy Hawkins when I'm through with her.

JIM BARBER. She hasn't.

JANE HATHAWAY. If you doubt my word, ask Betsy herself. Betsy! Betsy!

JIM BARBER. I'm not going to ask her. You was listenin'?

JANE HATHAWAY. I wasn't listening. I just happened to be weeding behind the fence and I couldn't help hearing.

JIM BARBER. You didn't make much effort to be polite and not to listen.

JANE HATHAWAY. Well, I couldn't help hearing, and let me tell you, Jim, we're in a queer fix, and I've been thinking on a way out for both of us.

JIM BARBER. I thought there was something up, you being so friendly and everything.

JANE HATHAWAY. Well, they say heaven helps them as helps themselves. Listen. Nothing would upset our families more than to hear of us getting married.

JIM BARBER. (*Astonished*) Get married! Did you say get married?

JANE HATHAWAY. Aye! If they thought you was going to marry me and maybe leave your money to my family it would flatten Angus out and maybe Elizabeth too.

JIM BARBER. I think it would.

JANE HATHAWAY. Well, it'd give them something to think about.

JIM BARBER. Jane Hathaway, is it the way you are proposing to me?

JANE HATHAWAY. Jim Barber, do you think I'm daft?

JIM BARBER. I knew you had something up your sleeve, but if it comes to marryin', the back of my hand to you.

JANE HATHAWAY. I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth.

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JIM BARBER. I'll say you wouldn't, but what are you drivin' at, anyhow?

JANE HATHAWAY. It's no us but our families are driving us to it. Mind you, I'm not wanting you, but it'd be a fine road out of the difficulty to tell them we're thinking about it.

JIM BARBER. Some idea, Jane. Just like you, long-headed. (*Begins to laugh*) I'd like to see Angus' face if he heard I was thinkin' a matrimony.

JANE HATHAWAY. (*Laughs with him*) Aye! You should have heard Mary rave when I told her.

JIM BARBER. (*Serious at once*) When you told her? What do you mean you slandering old villain? It'll be all over the town.

JANE HATHAWAY. Don't worry. It's all over the town now.

JIM BARBER. I'll sue you for defamation of character.

JANE HATHAWAY. Mind you, it'll save you a lot a trouble, Jim, if you can see it my way. Elizabeth has her mind made up.

JIM BARBER. And what are you going to do about it?

JANE HATHAWAY. I've done my bit. It's time you took a turn.

JIM BARBER. I'll say you have done quite a bit. I could sue you for defamation of character and fight you in the courts, but I won't. What you want I should do, but mind you, I'm not saying I'll do it.

JANE HATHAWAY. Just for the looks a things you could be sending me a bit present. A chicken, maybe.

JIM BARBER. It ain't feeble minded you're gettin', Jane Hathaway.

JANE HATHAWAY. How would it be, Jim, if I

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give you and Elizabeth an invitation to supper and let they think it's an engagement party?

JIM BARBER. I don't like it. Don't sound right to me.

JANE HATHAWAY. We could set the table out here in the yard.

JIM BARBER. See here, Jane Hathaway, your cookin' has the name of bein' fair, but the price a chicken's up.

JANE HATHAWAY. I hope it'll no be as tough as the other one. But you'll know better than me how to pick a nice bird.

JIM BARBER. I can see you're not aimin' to lose anything by this deal, Jane Hathaway.

JANE HATHAWAY. Man, can you no see it's the best thing can happen you? Can you no see I'm saving you from being nagged to death by Angus and Elizabeth?

JIM BARBER. But if it don't work, somehow?

JANE HATHAWAY. Don't be afraid. It'll work all right. You shoulda seen Mary's face when I told her.

JIM BARBER. What did she say?

JANE HATHAWAY. She said considerable and ended by saying she'd no believe it as long as this spite fence is standing here.

JIM BARBER. (*Excitedly*) Ah! I knew there was something back of all this. I knew you wasn't doin' it for my sake. Jane Hathaway, you haven't changed one iota. I'll bet when you were walkin' up to the gates of death, it was the way you went so crooked you couldn't get through.

JANE HATHAWAY. Maybe you're right. But it stands to reason, no couple planning to get married would have a spite fence between them.

JIM BARBER. It isn't spoilin' my business.

JANE HATHAWAY. Don't try to be smart, Jim Barber. We canna be getting prizes this Fall,

24 JIM BARBER'S SPITE FENCE

either of us, and if you want to get rid of Angus and Elizabeth, you'll need to do something.

JIM BARBER. You're a deep one, Jane, a deep one. But I'm not sure I'm seein' to the bottom of this yet.

JANE HATHAWAY. I'm no so deep as you think, but you've got to look trouble square in the face. It'll no disappear by turning your back.

JIM BARBER. Yes, but if you think you're goin' to get me mixed up in some marryin' scheme, you're mistaken; danged mistaken.

JANE HATHAWAY. I wouldn't marry a man who chews tobacco, Jim Barber, not for a million dollars, I wouldna. (*Exit.*)

JIM BARBER. (*As she disappears*) I chew all the time and I spit somethin' fierce. (*Laughs*) I thought that would settle her.

JANE HATHAWAY. (*Bobs up above the fence*) Is Elizabeth coming back?

JIM BARBER. I suppose so. What do you want to know for?

JANE HATHAWAY. Henry's coming too. Maybe we'd better not wait for the chicken. Just knock a few boards off the fence and have a bite a supper right away and tell them.

JIM BARBER. Tell them what?

JANE HATHAWAY. Tell them we're thinking a getting married.

JIM BARBER. Just the thought of it turns my stomach.

JANE HATHAWAY. Well, you needn't think I'm feeling light-hearted about it.

JIM BARBER. You seem mighty keen for it.

JANE HATHAWAY. All I'm wanting is to be left alone to live my life as I choose. Mind you, Jim, liberty's a grand thing.

JIM BARBER. Well, if we're goin' to do this you'd better get down. We'll knock a few boards off and get it over with.

JIM BARBER'S SPITE FENCE 25

JANE HATHAWAY. (*Eagerly*) I have an axe. I'll knock a few boards loose from the bottom. You can move the rest the morn. Eh?

JIM BARBER. (*Surprised at how easily the boards were loosened*) You had some of them boards loosened.

JANE HATHAWAY. (*As she comes through*) I knew you wouldn't be stubborn if you got the right of it.

JIM BARBER. I'm never stubborn. It's you.

JANE HATHAWAY. Nae doubt. But hurry now. Fetch yon table. I'll get a cloth. (*Goes through fence for cloth.*)

JIM BARBER. (*As he brings up table*) I wish I was well outa this mess.

JANE HATHAWAY. Well, you're not far off it, but I wouldna be weakenin' now. (*She pats cloth and puts knives and forks on table.*)

JIM BARBER. I'm not weakenin', but if you keep on I'll get riled and you'll wish you hadn't nagged at me.

JANE HATHAWAY. (*Working around table*) Hold your tongue and fetch me some chairs.

JIM BARBER. (*As he brings chairs from house*) I don't like this. Everybody talkin'. Lord knows what they'll say next.

JANE HATHAWAY. Maybe you'd sooner give up your liberty and be ordered around for the rest of your life in somebody else's house.

JIM BARBER. I'll go through with it. But don't you be gettin me in for somethin' I haven't bargained on. I'm not for marryin' anybody, I'm not.

JANE HATHAWAY. (*Calls through fence*) Come along, Henry. (*Sees ELIZABETH come from her father's house*) It's you, Elizabeth. Kind of a picnic we're having. (*Henry enters from the HATHAWAY side.*)

ELIZABETH. (*Looks at table*) Are you having a party? I don't understand.

26 JIM BARBER'S SPITE FENCE

JANE HATHAWAY. Aye! Your pa and me's havin' a bit party to celebrate taking down the spite fence and us making up. We expected you. Everything's ready.

HENRY HATHAWAY. What's this? A party?

JANE HATHAWAY. Yes, it's a party when I get the victuals from the house. But sit down. Jim dear, you'd best sit at the head of the table. (JIM sputters and rumbles down in his throat but does not move. JANE places a chair for him and while she is doing it, kicks his shin and he drops into it) Elizabeth, you sit there. Henry, you sit on the other side. (Goes to fence and calls) Betsy Betsy! Fetch the victuals.

ELIZABETH. I'm not going to sit down until I know what this is all about.

HENRY HATHAWAY. That's what I'd like to know. What is the idea?

JANE HATHAWAY. We'd no mind telling them, Jim, dear. (JIM nods weakly but does not speak.)

ELIZABETH. I'd like to know what all the talk is about you two.

JANE HATHAWAY. Sure, you want to know. Your pa and me are thinking of getting married and taking care of each other.

ELIZABETH. (*Hotly*) This is a put up job of yours, Jane Hathaway.

JANE HATHAWAY. It nothing of the kind. It's on account of you and Angus and Henry and Mary, so's you'll not be worrying about us living alone. Isn't it, Jim? (JIM nods weakly.)

ELIZABETH. I don't understand, Dad. You don't want to marry, do you? (JANE goes around and steps on JIM's foot.)

JIM BARBER. Well, I don't want you lyin' awake nights frettin' about me livin' alone.

JANE HATHAWAY. And we don't want to be cast aside like old boots past walking in.

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JIM BARBER. I'm raisin' some of the finest poultry like I've always wanted.

ELIZABETH. You'd have a better place to raise them on the farm, and you know it.

HENRY HATHAWAY. And we'll take care of you, mother. We want you to be happy, but it isn't wise for you to live alone.

ELIZABETH. You have a family, father. We'll take care of you. We're not going to let a grasping old woman—

JANE HATHAWAY. Call me a grasping old woman, would you? If it's me you're talking about you can stop right now. If I want I'll marry him in spite of you.

JIM BARBER. (*Springing up and defies them*) Keep quiet the lot of you. You've got me riled. Let me tell you if I want I'll marry Jane Hathaway, and if I marry her I'll do what I like with my money.

JANE HATHAWAY. Good for you, Jim. Go on and tell them a few things.

JIM BARBER. I'm going to live here and be as dirty as I want. I'll chew tobacco and smoke in bed and die alone if I like. I've worked for fifty years to get the right to do as I like and now you want I shouldn't, but I will. And if you go interfering any more, I'll sell the farm and homestead at the Peace River, where I won't be pestered by none of you.

JANE HATHAWAY. That's right, Jim. I didn't think you had so much spunk.

JIM BARBER. Keep quiet. I'm doin' this. (*Turns to ELIZABETH*) And—

JANE HATHAWAY. Well, if you are, come and help me fetch out the victuals. That Betsy Hawkins is deaf. (*She escorts him through the fence.*)

ELIZABETH. Well, what do you know about that?

28 JIM BARBER'S SPITE FENCE

HENRY HATHAWAY. I believe it's a put up job, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH. A put up job?

HENRY HATHAWAY. Yes. They've no intention of getting married. They're just trying to scare us.

ELIZABETH. What makes you think that?

HENRY HATHAWAY. I was waiting out in front for mother today and I heard a few words. I didn't know what they meant at the time, but I see now.

ELIZABETH. I know they don't want to leave their homes, but we'll have to do something. It hurts me to hear all the gossip about them.

HENRY HATHAWAY. It hurts me too. We've just got to have a showdown.

ELIZABETH. We must for their sake. They don't realize what people are saying.

HENRY HATHAWAY. (Laughs) I'll bet mother's at the bottom of all this.

ELIZABETH. I'm sure of that. But how she ever got father to agree, I don't know.

HENRY HATHAWAY. Let's call their bluff.

ELIZABETH. How could we?

HENRY HATHAWAY. We'll pretend we want them to get married.

ELIZABETH. That's a good idea. They'll be like naughty children when they're found out.

HENRY HATHAWAY. I'd take a chance on what people say and leave them alone to do what they like if it wasn't for my wife. All this gossip worries her terribly.

ELIZABETH. It worries Angus, too. He says we must do something to stop the quarrelling and talk.

HENRY HATHAWAY. There they come. (Enter JANE and JIM with some dishes.)

JANE HATHAWAY. That kettle isn't boiled yet.

JIM BARBER. Then for why should you trail me in after it? You should know—

JANE HATHAWAY. Stop your grumbling. A pity you hadn't something better to do. (*HENRY and ELIZABETH look at each other and nod.*)

HENRY HATHAWAY. (*Puts arm around his mother*) Mother, Elizabeth and I have been talking this over and we think it's a grand idea.

JIM BARBER. What's a grand idea?

ELIZABETH. For you and Mrs. Hathaway to get married.

JIM BARBER. For us to get married?

HENRY HATHAWAY. Wasn't that what you said you were going to do?

JANE HATHAWAY. Did you say you approved of it, Henry?

JIM BARBER. Were you sayin' you favoured it, Lizzie?

ELIZABETH. Well didn't you say you wished to get married and care for each other?

JIM BARBER. Would you be willing for me to be married to that sharp tongued, quarrelsome old woman?

JANE HATHAWAY. You hold your tongue, Jim Barber. Wasn't them your words?

JIM BARBER. I never said any such thing.

HENRY HATHAWAY. Well, what did you say?

ELIZABETH. People are saying you're going to get married. You've got to do something.

HENRY HATHAWAY. (*Looks meaningfully at ELIZABETH*) I'll say you have.

ELIZABETH. And do it now. Stop all this gossip.

JIM BARBER. You think we've got to do some-thin', do you?

HENRY HATHAWAY. I'm sure of it. I'll go for a preacher.

ELIZABETH. I'll go with you. (*She follows him out.*)

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JIM BARBER. Don't you dare fetch a preacher here.

JANE HATHAWAY. Keep quiet. They're calling our bluff.

JIM BARBER. Callin' our bluff?

JANE HATHAWAY. Yes, that's what they're doing. Clever they are.

JIM BARBER. Elizabeth's smart all right, but how do you know?

JANE HATHAWAY. I saw them grin at each other and wink.

JIM BARBER. I told you it wouldn't work out somehow.

JANE HATHAWAY. Seems like you were right for once.

JIM BARBER. Callin' our bluff, are they?

JANE HATHAWAY. They're all set for a showdown. We've got to do something.

JIM BARBER. They mean it kindly, Jane.

JANE HATHAWAY. Aye! But they don't understand.

JIM BARBER. Callin' our bluff. (*Looks meaningly at Jane*) Then mebbe we can call theirs, Jane.

JANE HATHAWAY. How could we do it, Jim?

JIM BARBER. You understand about that hen I'm goin' to breed, Jane? The prettiest in the world and the best layer, to be called the Barber hen?

JANE HATHAWAY. Aye! Kind of a monument to you, Jim, after you're gone.

JIM BARBER. How did you know that, Jane?

JANE HATHAWAY. How would I no know it, and me trying to raise the most beautiful rose to be called the Jane Hathaway.

JIM BARBER. The Jane Hathaway. That's kinda pretty.

JANE HATHAWAY. Do you think so, Jim?

JIM BARBER. Indeed I do. Tell me, Jane, was

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it the Jane Hathaway rose the leghorn was scratchin' up?

JANE HATHAWAY. It was.

JIM BARBER. Then I don't blame you for snippin' her head off.

JANE HATHAWAY. I thought you wouldn't, Jim.

JIM BARBER. (*Looks at JANE as if trying to get up courage to say something important*) No, I don't blame you, Jane.

JANE HATHAWAY. I'm glad of that, Jim.

JIM BARBER. (*Desperately*) Callin' our bluff, are they, Jane?

JANE HATHAWAY. Aye! That's what they're doing.

JIM BARBER. Looks like we've got to do some-thin'?

JANE HATHAWAY. It does, Jim.

JIM BARBER. (*Backs away*) No, I don't blame you for killin' the leghorn, Jane.

JANE HATHAWAY. I believe you, Jim.

JIM BARBER. I was goin' to say, Jane, we might—we might—we might as well— No, I don't blame you a bit, Jane.

JANE HATHAWAY. You can go on from that idea, Jim. I've got it in my mind.

JIM BARBER. (*Blurts out*) Will you—will you marry me, Jane.

JANE HATHAWAY. This is so sudden, Jim—but I will.

JIM BARBER. Well, it's sudden for me, too. I'm thinkin' mebbe it's a bit too sudden.

JANE HATHAWAY. (*Practically*) We'll need to be taking down this spite fence and stop quarrelling and making talk.

JIM BARBER. Sure, quarrellin' with you is no hardship, Jane.

JANE HATHAWAY. Aye! But we'll need to be doing it respectable in our own house.



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32 JIM BARBER'S SPITE FENCE

JIM BARBER. (*At the sound of voices*) There they come. (*HENRY and ELIZABETH enter.*)

JANE HATHAWAY. Where's the minister?

ELIZABETH. He's just over there in his garden—but—we thought you might wish to talk it over.

JIM BARBER. We have talked it over. You can go fetch him right away. (*HENRY and ELIZABETH withdraw looking dazedly at each other.*)

JANE HATHAWAY. Did you see their faces?

JIM BARBER. (*Chuckles*) We called their bluff all right.

JANE HATHAWAY. They mean to be good to us, Jim, but I'm thinking there's a bit bridge between youth and age and a span's missing in the middle.

JIM BARBER. (*Thoughtfully*) They don't understand and mebbe we don't either. (*Anxiously*) But you won't be interferin' with me raisin' my hens, Jane?

JANE HATHAWAY. Not if you keep your chickens away from my roses.

JIM BARBER. Jane Hathaway, was it the way you planned this all the time?

JANE HATHAWAY. Mebbe!

(*As the curtain goes down, HENRY and ELIZABETH are seen peeking over the fence.*)



